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AUTHOR Adolf, Jane W.
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ABSTRACT

In an effort to understand the emotional impact of abuse, many studies have been conducted to investigate the type of emotional problems suffered by abused children and to identify variables which may make them susceptible to damage. For example, studies have correlated emotional problems with age at which abuse occurred and with the type and severity of abuse. Still others have examined the impact of parent/child relationships on the disciplinary situation and on the child's later emotional development. It is the purpose of this paper to summarize these findings and others regarding some of the emotional damage that young children may suffer as a result of physical abuse and/or neglect. A brief summary of the psychological consequences of child abuse, particularly in the child's first 5 years of life, introduces a more in-depth discussion of the attachment relationship and the possible impact of child abuse on this relationship and on emotional well-being. Information gleaned from this discussion is used to hypothesize interventions to help prevent child abuse. (MP)

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Emotional Consequences of Child Abuse: The Attachment Relationship

by

Jane W. Adolf
University of Minnesota

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Emotional Consequences of Child Abuse:
The Attachment Relationship

This paper summarizes research regarding the psychological consequence of child abuse, particularly during the first few years of life. An indepth examination of the role of the attachment relationship in abusive families was undertaken to underscore the profound impact that abuse can have on emotional well-being. Information gleaned from this discussion was used to hypothesize intervention that may help to prevent child abuse.

The physical results of abuse and neglect are painful reminders to children that they have been battered, ignored or exploited. After these physical scars disappear, one wonders about the emotional wounds that persist, perhaps throughout a lifetime. In addition, if physical scars remain, self-esteem and body image may be detrimentally effected, further affecting emotional well-being (Hjorth and Harway, 1981; Kinard, 1979).

Causal predictions regarding the effects of physical abuse on emotional adjustment are difficult, if not impossible, to establish. There are many factors that may mediate each individual's reaction to abuse (Bybee, 1979; Kinard, 1979). The abused child is imbedded in a complex social system, the family, within an even more complex system, the society at large. To further complicate matters, each child has individual characteristics which are a product of both constitutional and environmental factors. These individual characteristics will effect the child's reaction to abuse as well as the environment's reaction to the child (ten Bensel, 1981).

In an effort to understand the emotional impact of abuse, many studies have been conducted to study the type of emotional problems suffered by abused children and variables which may make a child more susceptible to damage (Helfer, McKinney and Kempe, 1977; Kinard, 1978; Kinard, 1980; Kinard, 1982; Martin and Beezely, 1976). For example, studies have correlated emotional problems with age at which abuse occured and with the type and severity of abuse (Greem, 1978; Kinard, 1979). Still others have examined the impact of parent-child relationships on the disciplinary situation and later emotional development (Shafer, 1979).

The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the emotional damage that young children may suffer as a result of physical abuse and/or neglect. The

discussion will focus on the child's first five years of life. A brief summary of the emotional consequences of abuse will be conducted as an introduction to a more in-depth examination of the attachment relationship and the possible impact that child abuse may have on this relationship and emotional well-being.

When examining the research on the emotional consequences of child abuse, two general categories emerge with respect to how children react to an abusive situation: (1) They tend to be very passive and withdrawn (Kinard, 1979). These children tend to be overly docile - they appear apathetic and disinterested in what is happening around them. Kempe describes infants displaying this behavior as having a "frozen watchfulness" and playing very little (ten Bensel, 1981). (2) Children tend to be either actively or passively aggressive and negativistic (Kinard, 1979).

In general, abused children maintain negative self-concepts, low self-esteem, difficulties in relating to peers and adults, an impaired capacity to trust, and exhibit generalized unhappiness (George and Main, 1979; Kinard, 1979; Kinard, 1982). They appear unable to express feelings readily and seldom reveal any capacity for pleasure, enjoyment, or playfulness (Helfer, McKinney and Kempe, 1976). Kempe also reports that abused and neglected preschoolers are frequently anxious or fearful and expect punishment, disapproval, or critism (ten Bensel, 1981). Increased psychiatric symptoms such as tantrums, hyperactivity, and bizarre behavior were also noted in children suffering the most harsh physical punishment (Martin and Beezely, 1976). Children suffering from prolonged or recent abuse were more likely to have difficulty separating from their mothers (Kinard, 1982). This last finding indicates that the security that grows from an attachment relationship may have been affected by an abusive situation early in life.

The disturbance of the attachment relationship may be the first and most significant emotional consequence of abuse during infancy (Kinard, 1979). The importance of attachment will be discussed from ethological and psychoanalytic perspectives, particularly in relation to later emotional development. The development of a secure or insecure attachment is based on the relationship established between infant and caregiver. Research will be examined indicating that the interactive styles of normal, abusive and neglecting parents are quite distinct, perhaps providing a predictor for the type of attachment to be formed (Crittendon, 1981). Finally, conclusions will be drawn concerning the emotional impact that an insecure attachment relationship may have for an abused or neglected child.

There are many studies examining the importance of a secure, reciprocally responsive relationship with the primary caregiver (Honig, 1981; Klaus and Kennel, 1977; Yarrow and Pedersen, 1976). A basic tenet of ethological theory stresses the importance of a secure attachment for survival of the species (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969). Initially, attachment behaviors keep the child and primary caregiver in close proximity to each other. This should help ensure that a child's physical and emotional needs are met.[1] Overtime, the child develops a specific attachment and the attachment figure becomes a secure base from which to explore. This enables the child to detach and gain skills with the world of objects and other people. An insecurely attached child might cling to the parent or show little interest in anything; neither of these situations contribute to the child's adaptiveness as they inhibit learning about objects and interpersonal relationships (Maccoby, 1980).

[1]For a discussion of the existence of infant's emotional as well as physical needs see Harlow's work with primates. Harlow, H. and Zimmerman, R. "Affectual responses in the infant monkey." Science, 1959, 130, 421-32.

Erikson, from a psychoanalytic perspective, examines the attachment relationship in terms of resolving the first life crisis: trust vs. mistrust (Shafer, 1979). Erikson postulates that the feeding situation is critical during this crisis as it serves to help the child learn that needs are met and that his actions create responses from the environment. However, if the feeding situation, or any other situation demanding a response from a caregiver, is unsuccessful, that child may develop an apathetic stance toward impacting on his environment and may begin to mistrust the people around him. A successful resolution is dependent on whether a caregiver's behavior is contingent and appropriate to the child's needs. The manner in which a child resolves this crisis has great impact on later emotional development. Erikson feels that personality is that accummulated product of each resolution, therefore this first stage is particularly important (1959).

Both the ethological and the psychoanalytic perspectives underline the importance of a secure, responsive relationship for later competence and healthy emotional development. What about the relationship between the abused or neglected child and the primary caregiver? Physical and emotional needs may or may not be met. Inconsistency in responsive behavior may have serious impact on the development of a secure relationship, particularly if it is, indeed, based on responsiveness. Some recent research indicates that the relationship between normal, neglecting and abusive mothers effects the manner in which the baby learns to respond or not respond to the environment (Crittendon, 1981). Mothers who were sensitive, responsive and flexible were likely to have infants who enjoyed the interaction, had the opportunity to express their pleasure and displeasure and reinforced their mothers efforts... a cycle of signaling and adaptation was maintained. Neglecting mothers offered so little stimulation and responded to so few infant signals that they left their infants socially powerless and largely responsible for their own stimu-

lation...their infants showed correspondingly depressed levels of activity. Rather than modify their behavior to meet their infants' needs, abusive mothers usually continued to pursue their original plans as though they had not perceived the infant's cues. However, there were some very subtle behaviors which belied this interpretation: in their voice tone, facial expression, and pseudo-affectional behaviors, abusive mothers appeared to be both intentionally irritating their infants and enjoying their infants displeasure...mutual frustration became the pattern of interaction(Crittendon, 1981).

The above research highlights the lack of contingent, appropriate response with which abused and neglected children are faced. The children's responses to neglecting or abusive parents parallel Polansky, Hally and Polansky's finding that responses of children to neglect or abuse take on two forms: (1) apathy, passivity, withdrawal and flat affect and (2) hostility, anger, and aggression (1976). Although I'm not familiar with any follow up studies examining the type of attachment established with these children, from descriptions of the children's behavior the following hypotheses are offered: children with sensitive, responsive mothers will form secure attachments and successfully resolve the trust vs. mistrust crisis, children of neglecting mothers will probably form avoidant attachments, and children of abusive mothers will probably form anxious attachments.[2] Children in the last two categories will probably learn not to trust the environment because of their past failures in gaining responsiveness. This is supported by research by Kinard stating that abused children were found to exhibit more difficulty than non-abused children in establishing trust in others (1978).

[2]For a discussion of differences in the quality of relationships formed between infants and caregivers see E. Maccoby's Social Development. N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace and Janovich, 1980, pp. 100-102.

Does the quality of attachment during infancy relate to later social competence, and thus a better emotional well-being? Recent research at the University of Minnesota indicates that securely attached infants become socially and instrumentally competent preschoolers (Love, 1982). Conversely, children that were insecurely attached at 12 months tended to have difficulty relating to peers and adults in the preschool classroom, were less able to cope with frustration, and less capable of expressing emotions in an acceptable manner (Love, 1982). The inability to express emotions has been identified as characteristic of abused preschoolers (Helfer, McKinney and Kempe, 1977). It has also been designated as an indicator of risk for psychological problems (Lord, 1979). If abused infants have a higher liklihood of developing insecure attachment relationships due to either neglect or inappropriate responsiveness, it follows that a greater potential exists for having later emotional problems.

The establishment of an insecure attachment may be the most detrimental psychological consequence of abuse during infancy. What is the attachment history of children who are not abused until the preschool or elementary years? I would venture that children of insecure attachment relationships have a greater potential for later abuse. This would be supported by Klaus and Kennell's findings on the importance of bonding to the attachment relationship and the subsequent higher percentage of abuse among premature children (Kennell, Voos, and Klaus, 1976). Perhaps the clinginess and dependence of an anxiously attached child would move the parent to hostility. Perhaps the apathy of an avoidantly attached child frustrates the parent into demanding, perhaps through physical means, some kind of a response from the child. It would be interesting to develop a retrospective instrument that would determine the type of attachment relationship that existed prior to abuse. The results might indicate that early

parent-child relationships may be an indicator of later abuse. If this is true, an effort should be made to identify children existing in insecure relationships, and early intervention to affect the attachment relationship may help curtail later violence within the family.

This paper has summarized some of the research regarding the psychological consequences of child abuse, particularly during the first few years of life. An in-depth examination of the role of the attachment relationship in abusive families was undertaken to underscore the profound impact that abuse can have on emotional well-being. Information gleaned from this discussion was used to hypothesize intervention that might help to prevent child abuse.

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